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Mercedes, who was named DSP of the year in 2022, supports Jessica in all that she does. People have underestimated Jessica her whole life. They don't know that she studies at Montgomery College, has a vibrant Instagram account, makes videos in her spare time, and has a favorite drink at Starbucks (which she orders and pays for herself). And the support Mercedes provides helps make this possible. And although on any given day she is a job counselor, recreation specialist, personal care attendant, advocate, and coach, her pay, as dictated by reimbursement rates is on par with a fast-food worker. No one would ever consider a nurse or teacher a minimum wage job, and the role of a DSP shouldn't be either. The providers of services for people with developmental disabilities need the full 8.7% or \$1.4 million DDA budget supplement increase as requested so direct support professionals like Mercedes continue to help Jessica and her peers thrive. Her support means that Jessica is living the life of her choosing, and that is worth way more than minimum wage.

Thank you to the Montgomery County Council for letting me speak today on this critical issue. My name is Katrina Emmerson Kugel and I am the government affairs manager at SEEC, a regional service provider for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We employ 150 direct service professionals or DSPs like Mercedes who support over 320 adults, many of whom work in local business including the Smithsonian, local restaurants, nonprofits and even right here in this building where Ryan has a job in Councilmember Jawando's office. The national employment rate for people with disabilities is 20%, at SEEC, with the support of Montgomery County Government Supplement we can recruit and retain skilled job coaches who are also DSPs, it's 60%.

Other people supported by SEEC volunteer, own their own businesses, live in apartments with friends and roommates and are active members of their community. We believe people with disabilities should live the lives of their choosing and be integrated members of our community. DSPs help make that possible.

Without the support of the Developmental Disabilities supplement from the county and the 8.7% cost of living adjustment we simply cannot continue to provide commensurate wage increases to DSPs.

Current DDA rates only fund a starting wage for DSPs of \$13.50 per hour and this underpayment for such a critical role has led to a workforce crisis. According to Maryland Disabilities Council, in Maryland the average vacancy rate for MD IDD providers is 26% but a third have rates 30-60% and 10% have staff vacancy rates between 50-60%. DSP Turnover rate in Maryland is approximately 45%. Imagine if your local coffee shop had a 50% vacancy rate. Without adequate staff, people with IDD will not be able to get the supports they need to be your neighbor, or work in your office, or make sure your dishes are clean when you go out to dinner. And that is a loss for all of us.

People with IDD are customers, employees, neighbors, a vibrant and essential part of our community – during the pandemic not only were our DSPs frontline workers, but also the people we support who worked at the NIH, Target, and UPS, were essential workers who had to be in person on the job and who risked their own health to provided critical support to our community. I remember talking to David who drove his son Joey, who has an IDD, to work at the Montgomery County Police IT facility where he works on IT from the patrol cars. Joey's job was essential, as was the job coach that supported him.

In my lifetime, people with disabilities were hidden away and had no say in their lives. We are changing that, and the economic and social impact is immense. These are our neighbors, coworkers, fellow church goers and they deserve to live lives of their choosing even if they need support. Please don't let them down.

Thank you.